



Sensemaking: A Remedy for Indecisive Boards

Does your board ever have trouble making a decision? Here are steps to solve the problem.

BY JOHN PERKINS

A spell of indecisiveness can afflict even well-functioning boards. Temporary indecisiveness can be a healthy stage as members grapple to understand policy options. However, chronic indecisiveness eventually takes a toll on board members as well as the whole organization.

Not every issue causes chronic indecisiveness. Progress on most issues glides along well enough, but on *The Issue* a board can't seem to make a choice to drop it, table it until additional information can be secured, or adopt it as new policy. *The Issue* gets an honored place on the agenda—meeting after meeting. Sometimes an entire retreat is devoted to it, leaving no doubt about its importance. In a flurry of movement, a decision may be made, but, somehow, a month or two later, *The Issue* is reopened and the whole dreary Sisyphean¹ process starts anew.

Sound familiar? Because this situation is common doesn't mean you can't fix it. The remedy is, first, to understand what causes indecisiveness.

The Ambiguous Life of Boards

Boards teem with ambiguities, uncertainties, and risks—just what

you would expect from a peer-based group with the highest legal authority for setting policy in an organization. It's the board's role to clarify ambiguities either by allowing current policies to stand or by crafting new ones to meet emergent circumstances.² No one tells the board what to do; it must find its own way. Should it cling to the original mission of the organization, enlarge, or shrink it? Should it be open to direct communication with constituents and staff, or should all communication be filtered through the executive director? How should it deal with a lack of quorums? How much training should be provided to newly recruited members? And so on.

An ambiguity is a statement which can be interpreted two or more different ways.³ Chronic indecisiveness in a board occurs because a policy proposal means different things to each board member, and the board as a group lacks the norms and procedures to sort out the various meanings and select one action. Indecisiveness is especially likely under the following conditions:

- Many board members are unsure what they think and want in regard to *The Issue*.

Some prefer the research of experts, even those long dead.

- Some members feel that, although they have something valuable to contribute to the decision, their opinions aren't "heard."
- Board members differ on how to evaluate potential results of alternative actions.
- *The Issue* has confused some members, but they're reluctant to ask basic questions which they fear might be interpreted as ignorance and inattention.
- The board is genuinely split on which action to take and hasn't agreed on a conflict resolution procedure.
- Board members react inconsistently to their own previous positions on *The Issue* and prior decisions about it.



Picture a spiral staircase with board members standing on different stairs, in the dark.

Sensemaking as Remedy

All roads to clarity, movement, and momentum travel through sensemaking.⁴ Sensemaking is what people do to reduce ambiguity, uncertainty, or complexity. They may do so in three ways:

1. **Sensemaking processes** include discussions during meetings, brainstorming, and so on.
2. **Sensemaking activities** include paper-and-pencil assessments, fact-finding trips to gather more information, and the like.
3. **Sensemaking artifacts** include paper documents such as minutes and reports, electronically recorded communication such as audio tapes, and records of communication on the Internet, such as Web pages and e-mail.

There are three perspectives⁵ in sensemaking:

1. **First-person sensemaking** includes all the ways a board member can clarify *The Issue* while alone. It may include making lists or comparison tables, conducting independent research, recalling dreams, or taking long walks to ponder *The Issue*. It also includes all the prior life experiences and education a particular member consciously or unconsciously draws upon while contemplating *The Issue*.
2. **Second-person sensemaking** involves peer-level interactions and alternating cycles of rehearsal and performance. The essential

feature of second-person sensemaking is that participants can speak directly to one another, and everyone's understanding of *The Issue* moves along at about the same pace.

3. **Third-person sensemaking** shows two different faces. One face of third-person sensemaking subordinates people and their experiences. The influence of this perspective pervades our culture through the scientific method and the practice of speaking of "truth," "facts," and "knowledge" as if they existed independent of human understanding and interpretation.⁶ It leads some to prefer impersonal "research" conducted by experts detached from the board. These authorities may even be long dead.

The other face of third-person sensemaking creates a participative structure into which others can be invited. Members who prefer this mode of sensemaking understand that the theories and practices of others serve only as guides. Each board faces its own unique and changing factors which it alone must account for when deciding on policy.

The Sensemaking Spiral

A facilitator can help a board through the sensemaking process. This person will need special qualities to guide board members from the gloom of indecisiveness into the clear light of confident policy decision making. The facilitator actually guides several sensemaking journeys at once—each board member's journey toward clarity about *The Issue* as



well as members' collective sense of what the rest of the board thinks about *The Issue*. As members gather confidence, they can be guided to act collectively in the name of the board and select a policy alternative with a course of action.

You can picture the process as a spiral staircase with members standing on different stairs. Each one stands in the dark. The staircase is wide enough that the whole board can actually stand on the same step. At the beginning of the process board members are scattered up and down the staircase. Some have raced ahead, perhaps even to the top, and are impatiently waiting for their fellow members to catch up. Others may be lagging far behind, perhaps at the very bottom. Maybe they have a fear of heights. Or perhaps they're all too familiar with this staircase and would prefer a different one. As they stand in the dark, some shout out their positions, while some remain silent. The only person with a flashlight is the facilitator.

From this metaphor, a method suggests itself. The facilitator must travel the length of the staircase and discover the location of every member. Sometimes members may be closer to one another than they thought; other times they may be wide apart. The facilitator must bring them together. Once they're all on the

same step, the facilitator has only to illuminate the next one and help the members communicate with one another as they prepare to make that step together.

The Journey

Bringing sensemaking into the picture of board self-management adds a new awareness of how to address the confusion and delays which sometimes affect a board's handling of an issue. An understanding of how members, both individually and collectively, can be aided in their sensemaking process adds a powerful tool for boards chairs, executive directors, or consultants to use when faced with chronic indecisiveness.

Every board will encounter a time when it will want to stop the confusion and start making sense. As E. L. Doctorow once remarked, it sometimes feels as if we're driving on an unfamiliar road in a thick fog. We drive slowly and carefully because we can only see a small distance ahead. But it is possible to make the whole journey that way. ■

Footnotes

¹Sisyphus, a tyrant, received a curse from the gods of ancient Greece to spend eternity pushing a large boulder up a hill only to see it roll to the bottom just before it reached the top.

²Houle, Cyril O., *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989, pp. 10-11.

³Empson, William, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, New York: New Directions, 1953, p. 1.

⁴See Weick, Karl E., *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995.

⁵See Torbert, William, "Developing Courage and Wisdom in Organizing and in Sciencing," available at http://www2.bc.edu/~torbert/11_97_coeur_grise.html, 1997.

⁶Soros, George, "A Failed Philosopher Tries Again," available at <http://www.soros.org.mk/osi/soros/en/patocka.htm>.

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center (608-274-9777).

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